

The Use of Metaphor in Pauline Theology

Michael 'deji Olajide

Abstract

“Paul’s letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort...” (2 Peter 3:15-16). Just as the ancient writers claimed that Paul’s letters were difficult to understand such still persists till today. Many preachers and teachers of the Bible still err as they interpret Pauline corpus. The quest of this paper is to unravel the intricacy and complexity of Paul’s theology and literature via his use of metaphor.

Keywords: metaphor, Paul, theology, Pauline corpus

Introduction

Metaphor is not a mere matter of words, not just based on similarity, not just a feature of poetic or rhetorical language, and not deviant. Rather, metaphor is conceptual, not merely linguistic. A metaphor is a systematic conceptual mapping from one conceptual domain (the source) onto another (the target). It may introduce conceptual structure. Also, metaphor functions primarily to allow sensory-motor reasoning to apply to subjective judgments (Larkoff, 2003). Metaphor occupies a very significant place in Paul’s writings and theology.

Doreen Inees traces the history of the word to “metafor” which was first found in the writings of Aristotle and his contemporaries. It originally meant “carrying across” or transference (cf. Latin *transferre*, *translatio*); and the vocabulary of movement, change/exchange, and place/domain is frequent, reflecting the basic idea that a term is transferred from its original context to another (2003:7).

Christological Metaphor

The metaphor of “sacrifice” was sometimes used to describe the death of noble persons, such as that of Socrates and Demosthenes, the latter being an enactment of the former. In James Dunn’s (1996) study of the Epistle to the Colossians, he declares that the character of the Greek, including its awkward links, may simply be the result of an attempt to describe the effectiveness of Christ’s death by using a sequence of metaphors. Some of them, already traditional, however, do not sit comfortably together: circumcision, burial and resurrection, death and (new) life, expunging the record and stripping off and public triumph.

The theological metaphor of Adam Christology could be extended back to include Jesus’ whole life. But the focus of Adam Christology lies clearly in Christ’s death and resurrection. And if the exposition of the theme in Romans 5 centers on the death of Christ (5.15-19), the exposition of 1 Corinthians 15 certainly centers on the resurrection of Christ. As Adam stands for death, so does Christ stand for resurrection (1 Cor. 15.21-22) (Dunn, 1998:241).

Ecclesiastical Metaphor

Parallels with the “body” metaphor to denote a community occur in Plato, Livy, Cicero, Epictetus and Plutarch, and are common in the Graeco-Roman world. Livy, the Roman historian, recounts the analogy used in Menenius Agrippa’s address to the rebel workers who wanted to take action against their employers. Paul turns the analogy upside-down, to urge the self-styled elite or “strong” that the “weak” are needed, and stand in solidarity with them. Thus he writes: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor.12.21); “The members (or limbs) we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor...If one member suffers, all suffer with it”(12.23,26); “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?”(12.17); “If it were a single member (or limb) where would the body be?” (12.19). To suggest that there are parallels in the Graeco-Roman world does not mean that Paul borrowed directly from these classical authors; this analogy was probably familiar both to Paul and to many of his readers. Another possible source is that of the terracotta models of body-parts, still preserved in the museum at Corinth today, relating to “cures” by the pagan god Asklepios, the Greek god of medicine (Thiselton, 2009:104).

The Spirit and the Temple (1& 2 Corinthians)

This metaphor and contrast is brought to the fore in 1 Cor. 3:16–17. The imagery of the Church as God’s temple occurs twice more in Paul (2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21). This concept has Jewish undertones and the imagery reflects the OT people of God and the place of purity and holiness in their worship of Yahweh. Paul is here reflecting on the Church as the corporate place of God’s dwelling, who, when gathered in Jesus’ name, experienced the presence and power of the Lord Jesus in their midst (5:4-5). Again, as in 2:10-13 (cf.2:4-5), the Spirit is the key, the crucial reality, for life in the new age. The presence of the Spirit, and that alone, marks them off as God’s new people, his temple, in Corinth (Fee, 1987: 147).The importance of this metaphor is apparent when he puts it to good use a second time as he deals with the matter of illicit sexual behavior that arises from the faulty assumption, which in turn arises from their belief that all things are lawful for them. This metaphor surfaces once

more in 2 Cor. 6:14b–16a where there is contrast between Christ/Belial, light/darkness and believer/unbeliever. These texts are rich, not only with the resonance of metaphor, but with the residue of communal misunderstanding. From each of the three occurrences in the Corinthian correspondence will emerge, in deferring degrees, two distinctive characteristics of this metaphor: its power to communicate both the need for unity and the indispensability of holiness. Both play pivotal roles in Paul's adoption of the metaphor twice in 1 Corinthians. The scenario becomes more complicated, however, in 2 Corinthians, where Paul dispenses with his plea for unity—unity with unbelievers in this context—and presses instead for holiness. (Porter, 2006:189-190).

Eucharistic Metaphor

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1Co 12:12 also Rom 12: 4-5). The extension of the simile in 1 Corinthians 10:17 shows that Paul intended his statement in ch. 10 to be taken as a metaphor. We conclude this: through their participation in the Lord's Supper believers show that they are like a single physical body, not that through their participation they are Christ's physical body.

Somatic Metaphor

Robert Gundry's seminal work on *σῶμα* in Pauline Anthropology is worthy of mentioning. The ecclesiastical Body is metaphorical in that the equation of one member with the eye of the Body, another member with the ear, and so on can be understood (but is easily misunderstood) only in a figurative way. The physical bodies of believers help make up the reality to which the metaphor “Body of Christ” points, simply because physical bodies form part of the constitution of believers and therefore belong to Christ. That is enough to explain Paul's strictures against the physical sins of intercourse with a prostitute (1 Cor. 6: 12-20), submission to circumcision after baptism (Gal 5: 2-6), and participation in pagan banquets (1 Cor. 10: 1-22).

The Metaphor of ‘Dying and Living’ in Galatians 2:19-20

Moyer V. Hubbard has rightly noted that

As a theological and epistolary nodal point, Galatians 2:19–20 pays close scrutiny and significantly augments the understanding of Paul's death–life symbolism. It underscores again the foundational nature of this soteriological metaphor for Paul, while at the same time illuminating the message of Galatians (2004:123).

This passage, more than any other, reveals the Christological foundation of Paul's death–life symbolism. The union of the believer with Christ is so complete that what is true of Christ is true of the believer as well. This is clear in comparing Romans 6:10 with Galatians 2:19, where “Christ” and “I” seem interchangeable: as Christ's death results in “life to God” (Rom. 6:10), so too with the “I” of Galatians 2:19.

Other Uses of Metaphorical Expression in Pauline Epistles

Apostle Paul gives a vivid picture of his human side in his Epistles to the Gentiles. To build up the portrait of Paul, one can examine the mind of his subject, and also to gain insight to the study of the style of his writings; and his argument and illustrations clearly support the old adage that the style is the man. He has a great range of allusion and metaphor in his letters. Below are the metaphorical expressions:

1. **Warfare as a metaphor for the struggle and conflict of a Christian life.**
 - You may fight the good fight (1 Tim. 1:18).
 - Give the enemy no opportunity for slander (1 Tim. 5: 14). (The word for occasion is peculiar to Paul in the New Testament. It is frequent in Classical Greek, i.e. “a base of operations” in war.)
 - A good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2: 3).
 - Gain control over weak-willed women (2 Tim. 3: 6).
2. **The use of Classical Architecture to describe the building up of the Christian life.**
 - An excellent standing (1 Tim. 3: 13).
 - ... God's household which is . . . the pillar and foundation (θεμέλιος) of the truth (1 Tim. 3: 15).
 - A firm foundation (1 Tim. 6:19.).
 - The firm foundation stands (2 Tim. 2:19.)
3. **Ancient Agriculture**

In fact, it is used in the Pastoral Epistles as numerous as any other class, thus revealing that, although Paul was a man of cities and towns, the impression that country life and industry had made on his mind was not small.

- We labor and strive (1 Tim. 4:10).

- They who labor in the word (1 Tim. 4:17).
 - The laborer is worthy of his hire (1 Tim. 5:18).
 - A root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10).
 - Rebuke them sharply (literally cutting away as with a sharp pruning knife),(Tit. 1:13).
 - And not live unproductive lives (Tit. 3:14).
 - The hard working farmer (2 Tim. 2:6).
 - Broken branches (Roman 11:11- 24).
4. **Metaphors drawn from Greek games**
Paul's use of the athlete metaphor in 1 Cor. 9:24-26 echoes the themes and values of his contemporary culture. He employs the language and symbolism of other teachers of the first century CE (Garrison, 1997:103)
- Train yourself to be godly (1 Tim. 4:7).
 - If anyone competes as an athlete (2 Tim. 2:5).
 - I have finished the race (2 Tim. 4:7).
5. **The Metaphors concerning Roman Law**
- We might become heirs (Titus 3:7).
 - Adoption (Rom. 8:15, 23).
 - Full right of sons (Gal. 4: 5).
 - Adopted as sons through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1: 5).
 - Attestation and inheritance (Gal. 3:15, 5: 1, etc.).
6. **Medical Science**
- Encourage others in the sound doctrine (Tit. 1:9).
 - That they may be sound in the faith (Tit. 1:13).
 - What is in accord with sound doctrine (Tit.2:1).
 - Not put up with sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3).
 - Spread like a gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17).
 - Fall asleep (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11).
7. **Maritime Life**
- Have shipwrecked their faith (1 Tim. 1 19).
 - Which drown men in destruction and perdition (1 Tim. 6: 9).
8. **Commercial Life**
- Godliness is a means to financial gain (1 Tim. 6. 5).
 - What I have entrusted to Him (2 Tim. 1:12).
 - The good deposit (2 Tim. 1: 14).
9. **The Fowler's Craft**
- Into the devil's trap (1 Tim. 3:7).
 - Fall into temptation and a trap (1 Tim. 6: 9).
 - Escape from the trap of the devil (2 Tim. 2: 26).

In Pauline epistles, metaphor has a prominent usage. Modern life has not outgrown those trades, professions, sports, and industries, although perhaps "the fowler's craft" is not so well known in the Twentieth Century as it was in the First. But all the others (warfare, architecture, agriculture, games, medical science, and law, maritime and merchant life) are still to be found in this age. If Paul had only drawn, or frequently drawn, on the passing things of the First Century, much of his writings would be unintelligible to us, and one would need to undertake a good deal of research to arrive at the meaning of the message he was endeavoring to express. But because he drew on the basic professions, trades, etc., of civilization, his meaning is almost as clear to us as it was to his readers nearly two thousand years ago. Thus it seems that the Holy Spirit led him in this path so that later ages might know the mind of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

One must not forget that there is evidential value in a study of the metaphors of Paul. But the fact remains that there is a unity of style in the use of metaphor, and the unity of style tends to prove the unity of authorship. Authors may change their style over a long period of time, but certain peculiarities of speech and writing will always remain, and perhaps one can say that Paul did retain it.

These peculiarities in his use of similar metaphors in different letters, it is clear also that the active, energetic side of the Christian life made its paramount appeal to Paul. He does not dwell very much on the mystical contemplative aspect of Christian experience when using these metaphors; but almost without exception he uses them to illustrate the building up of the soul into the likeness of Christ, or the spreading, by vigorous effort, of the Gospel throughout the world.

Theological Implications of Paul's Metaphorical Expressions

The writings of Paul are rich in metaphor, and in fact the whole of Scripture has its own distinctive imagery, and through the use of this imagery much instruction is conveyed. Hence, in order to understand Paul, it is not enough to study his writings, but it is necessary also to know something of his times. In studying the Bible, the dictionary of things is almost as important as the dictionary of words, and Paul's writings are no exception to this rule, but one of its best exemplifications. No writer can express himself without keeping in close touch with the fashions, tastes, habits and ways of his own time. If he does not, he becomes unintelligible to the people to whom he is writing. Therefore, in any study of the metaphors of Paul one must endeavor to reset his words in the associations of his own day.

It is interesting to notice that Paul's favorite metaphors and illustrations are in some ways unlike those used by his Master. The Lord Jesus Christ was a man of the open air. For the greater part of His life He lived in small towns and villages, and naturally drew on the sights and scenes of those places to illuminate His teaching. His many parables reveal clearly enough that He made close contact with nature and the simple things of earthly life. But Paul was a dweller in towns, one who felt very deeply the hustle and bustle of city life. He was also a traveler to far-off places, familiar with docks, and ships and buildings, and the colorful life of busy centers of commerce; consequently his writings are filled with those things. Paul and Jesus lived in the same century, and were men of the same spiritual outlook and purpose; but because of their differing environments they reveal contrasts in their styles of expression, for men can only draw on those things with which they are familiar.

In his Thessalonian correspondence, Paul presents the newly founded church with a depiction of the Christian life amidst the unbelieving world. Yet, despite all the rich facets that the discussion entails, the apostle, in a truly masterful way, never loses sight of the resurrection grounding and the unequivocal future focus of Christianity (Malysz, 2003). He manages to achieve this unity, in part at least, by employing the imagery of sleep in a variety of ways, drawing on both the Graeco-Roman and the Jewish traditions. With regard to the former, he successfully counters the prevalent deterministic philosophies of the day and transcends the mere euphemistic character of the term *sleep*, as he underscores the crucial element of Christian hope. Death for the believer truly is sleep. Paul then goes on to present the Christian life as one of watchfulness in a series of exhortations that remain very much in keeping with the Jewish perception of sleep. In so doing, he reacts with particular force and clarity of argument to cultic immorality, so widespread in the Thessalonica of the first century. Finally, by once again appealing to the imagery of sleep, he unites all the strands of his discussion into a coherent whole, crowned with a justification statement that firmly puts the focus on the cross. It is through the cross that all sleepiness is forgiven. It is through the cross that the dead are now asleep only to wake up to eternal life at Christ's Second Advent.

In the stumbling allegory of Rom 11:11-15, some Israelites are depicted as "stumbling," but it is emphatically stated that they have not "fallen." This state is largely attributed to God's initiative rather than their failure, in order to reach the nations. In the olive tree allegory of vv. 16-24, Paul portrays some Israelites as "broken" (ἐκκλάω) branches through v. 21, because of their unfaithfulness. This word choice does not make it clear that they are broken *off*, but can mean that they are simply broken, remaining on the tree in a wounded state (Nanos, 2008).

However, later in the allegory, in vv. 22-24, these branches are referred to as "cut off" (ἐκκόπτω), to frame his *a fortiori* threat to the grafted-in wild olive cutting, and to point out that God is able to graft the natural branches back on again. While *broken*, as in wounded, can reflect the image of *stumbling* developed in the prior allegory, *cut off* instead parallels the idea of *falling*. This inference carries a sense of finality that leads Paul to assert God's miraculous power to reverse the normal course of events.

Conclusion

Understanding Paul's use of metaphor is a potent tool to unlock his theology. And as we engage this noble task it affords us the opportunity to grasp, penetrate, and interact with the ancient world, namely the Jewish and Greco-Roman culture and literature. So far, this study has made attempt to unveil the dynamism and richness of Paul's literature and theology, and particularly his use of metaphor; similar to the significance of the use of proverbs in African culture and literature.

References

- Anthony C. Thiselton (2009). *The Living Paul: An Introduction to the Apostle's Life and Thought*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press.
- Dunn, D.G. James. (1996). *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon: a Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- _____. (1998). *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Fee, Gordon D. (1987). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans

- Publishing Company.
- Garrison, Roman. (1997). *The Graeco-Roman Context of Early Christian Literature*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 137. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd.
- Gundry, H. R. (1976). *Soma in Biblical Theology with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hubbard, M. V. (2004). *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought*. New York: Cambridge.
- Inees, D. (2003). "Metaphor, Simile, and Allegory as Ornaments of Style" in *Metaphor, Allegory and the Classical Tradition: Ancient Thought and Modern Revisions* G.R. Boys-Stones ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2003). "How the Body Shapes Thought: Thinking with an All-Too Human Brain," in *The Nature and Limits of Human Understanding* (ed. Anthony Sanford; The 2001 Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow; London: T. & T. Clark.
- Levison, John R. (2006). *Paul and His Theology*. Porter, E. Stanley (Ed.), Leiden: Brill Academy.
- Nanos M. D. (2008). *Broken Branches: A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11-24)*, Germany.
- Piotr J. Malysz, (2003). "Paul's Use of the Imagery of Sleep and His Understanding of the Christian Life", *Concordia Theological Journal* volume 67.65-78.
- Porter, S. (2006). *Paul and His Theology*. Leiden: Brill Academy.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

